



The Big Read sparks the expansion of New Rockford's arts

By Tessa Sandstrom

There are fires burning in New Rockford. Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, a story about censorship and book burning, is partly to blame, but so is the Dakota Prairie Regional Center for the Arts (DPRCA). It was the center that helped spark the first flames on September 11, at the "Light the Fire Kick-off" and it's the Center that wants to keep fanning them. And, many hope it will.

Unlike *Fahrenheit 451*, however, the fires weren't caused from burning books, but rather from reading them. New Rockford is part of a nationwide reading program, the Big Read, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts. The program was started in 2004

to encourage literary reading by asking communities to come together to read and discuss one book, and New Rockford and the DPRCA took advantage of the program to expand on their already flourishing theater program. "We've been doing primarily music and theater and we have really wanted to stretch our wings," says Deb Belquist, the director for the DPRCA. "We saw the request for grant proposals and thought it was a great opportunity for DPRCA to begin providing a wide slate of events."

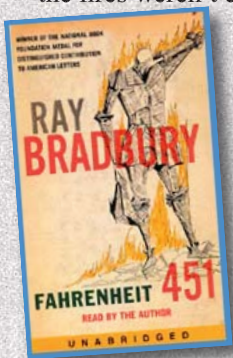
The "Light the Fire Kick-off" began in New Rockford on September 11 with keynote speaker Corey Seymour, a journalist and senior editor of *Men's Vogue*. Seymour has contributed to a number of magazines as both a writer and editor, including *Rolling Stone Magazine*, *Runner's World* and *Men's Journal*, among others. He recently

co-authored a book with *Rolling Stone* founder and editor, Jann S. Wenner, titled *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson*, which will be published in October by Little, Brown & Co.

Belquist said more than 800 people attended the kickoff event and



Corey Seymour participation has been excellent during the book discussions and readings in each of the eight area communities participating in the Big Read, including New Rockford, Carrington, Harvey, Fessenden, Maddock, Minnewaukan, Fort Totten and Sheyenne. The books were distributed by local firemen at



“Burnout Barbeques” in each town. The communities held regular meetings to discuss the novel and the issues it presented.

“It has been very interesting having students and adults all reading the same book,” says Belquist. “We have had some very engaged book discussions and people in all of the participating communities are enjoying all of the events associated with the National Endowment for the Arts *The Big Read* program.”

With the completion of the project on October 11, Belquist and others hope the flame won’t die with the last page of the book, but rather continue as the DPRCA works to include such activities into its regular schedule of events. But, considering the success of the DPRCA since 1991, there is no doubt that there will be enough energy and enthusiasm to fan this flame for several years to come.

The DPRCA was organized in 1991 and has since grown to support more than just a theater program. The DPRCA has renovated the community’s Opera House, which includes the auditorium and another room for a coffee house and is in the process of renovating a dance studio that will be used for both dance and as an art gallery and another building that will be used for apartments for cast members to stay in. Cast members who come from areas far enough away to stay in New Rockford had previously been staying in a house owned by the Center. Upon the apartment building’s completion, the house will be sold.

DPRCA has not only led the way in revitalizing the arts in New Rockford, but also in the community’s own revitalization and development. “When we first started in 1991, people were really skeptical if others would come for theater performances,” admitted Belquist. “But, that first year, we had people come from a 60-mile radius.” Now, nearly 15 years later, the theater is experiencing more success than ever before. The DPRCA’s most recent production, the musical comedy, *The Ark*, was sold out and its production dates extended, and the Big Read Program



Seymour, a graduate of New Rockford High School, returned home for one week as the keynote speaker for “Light the Fire,” the community’s kickoff event for the NEA’s Big Read program. Photo courtesy of Deb Belquist

will find performers getting ready for the production of *Fahrenheit 451*, and then the Christmas Show to be held November 30 to December 31. These are great changes compared to the small organization that started out in 1991.

“We were doing quality work as a theater, but the front didn’t look quality. Now, they come to shows or the Latte Lobby, and it’s like stepping into a city. People really comment on how beautiful the city looks. We’ve spurred businesses that want to do something to the front of their buildings.” The community’s steps toward renovation are proof that the DPRCA has what it takes to spark fires and then fan the flames. And, like a fire that sweeps across the prairie to allow re-growth, the arts have

ushered in a new era of economic and community development. “It has really revitalized our community.”

For more information on the Big Read Program in New Rockford or to get your own community involved in the program, visit www.neabigread.org.

Find additional information about production times or other events taking place in New Rockford by visiting www.dprca.com.

The DPRCA receives an institutional Support Grant from the North Dakota Council on the Arts. For more information about the NDCA and its programs that support communities across the state, call 701-328-7590 or visit NDCA website at www.nd.gov/arts.



The theater’s most recent production *The Ark* sold out and extra performances were added because of a high demand for more showings.



Photos courtesy of Deb Belquist